The Multiple Bodies of
The Three-Body Problem

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Unbeknownst to most anglophone readers, Cixin Liu's acclaimed *Santi* trilogy has been published in three discrete versions, each one with unique features. In its earliest incarnation, the first novel of the *Santi* trilogy was published serially in a Chinese sf magazine before appearing in novel form in Chinese. The third iteration, an English translation titled *The Three-Body Problem*, was primarily based on the initial serialized version. In each version, the title is reimagined, pages are shuffled around, and the narrative rhythm is modified. Taking *The Three-Body Problem* as its key example, this paper provides perspectives on how to approach a fiction that has not one but multiple "bodies."

Introduction

In his *Santi* trilogy[1]—comprising the novels *The Three-Body Problem* (2007, English 2014), *The Dark Forest* (2008, English 2015), and *Death's End* (2010, English 2016)—Cixin Liu, China's most significant writer of sf, describes the human world over a vast timespan, from the critical years of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution to a distant future when aliens have colonized Earth. The plot of the trilogy hinges on a social Darwinist conceit: the so-called "dark forest," a theory developed in the trilogy's fictional field of "cosmic sociology." The theory postulates that the universe is like a dark forest, with every civilization constantly hunting or being hunted, or both. This means that peace among planets with intelligent life is best maintained by virtue of their remaining unknown to each other. A civilization that reveals itself will perish because distant and heretofore undetected cultures will attack it to eliminate a potential future threat.

In the first novel of the *Santi* trilogy, *The Three-Body Problem*, a Chinese woman named Ye Wenjie witnesses the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution persecuting her scientist father. Thus disillusioned, she becomes desperate to change human civilization by inviting alien aid. She reveals the location of Earth to hostile aliens from Alpha Centauri, knowing that in a dark forest, these aliens would likely try to annihilate Earth, causing humans to perfect

themselves in response or else go extinct. From this point on, the *Santi* trilogy immerses readers in an Earth continually on the brink of destruction. Besides the diegetic possibility of Armageddon, the trilogy's fast-paced, episodic stories and unfamiliar era and landscapes challenge readers to keep up. The dramatic plot twists are definitely attractions of this trilogy, even if, by the end, it is so full of apocalyptic scenarios that in a way the end of the world no longer feels threatening.

It is crucial to note that what is often presumed to be one novel, *The Three-Body Problem,* is actually only one of multiple versions. Initially, the book was published serially in a Chinese sf periodical. It was later compiled into book form by a Chinese publisher. The English-language translation—the third version of this novel—was based on the original serial iteration. In order to demonstrate how the multiple versions illustrate the cultural politics behind the trilogy's appeal, both in China and globally, this paper proposes a two-fold argument. First, I claim that in the serial and the English version of the first novel, the history of China is presented like an sf story itself. These versions' orientalist highlightings of the Cultural Revolution presents China's cultural past as in itself a kind of dystopian novel; this political emphasis is aesthetically appealing to Westerners because it generates a kind of "diversity" in the globalized genre of sf. I call the prominent—but problematic—framing of Chinese history as an sf plot *history as dystopia*. This sort of narrative device reduces Liu's contribution to the Anglophone sf scene, rendering it a mere marketing technique based on the attraction of a Chinese national label among "global science fictions" (Csicsery-Ronay 478).

Second, I contend that when China becomes intelligible as an sf story, the story's *narrative structure*, as opposed to the story itself, serves as an important device to overcome a longstanding binary between China and the world, a binary that is at the bottom of the pigeonholing of Liu's sf as a Chinese ethnic version of a globalized genre. The structure takes on an episte-mological task that is much more far-reaching than showcasing the history of China: It attempts to contain the unlimited possibilities of death and survival in the limited form of sf. I use the term *encyclopedism* to designate this episte-mological task. What is most special about Liu's narrative is his emphasis on the techniques of survival through encyclopedic narratives about destructions.

A note on terminology: I refer to the multiple versions of the trilogy as *multiple bodies*, deliberately conflating the "bodies" of the three versions with Liu's use of *ti* (body) in the Chinese title of the trilogy *Santi* ("Three-Body"). In physics, the three-body presents a problem of calculating the forces and positions of each object for future times; in the sense that the relationship

between the three objects determines the future expression of the whole, the multiple "bodies" of the trilogy—the serial form, the book, and the English iteration—echo Liu's textual reference to *santi*.

The Multiple Bodies

The first of the *Santi* novels, *The Three-Body Problem,* revolves around a twenty-first-century scientist named Wang Miao. Wang discovers that scientific development is stuck at the stage of quantum physics because of some invisible, obstructive force acting on humanity. In the process of his investigation, he stumbles upon a virtual reality game called Three Body. In the game, Wang finds himself in a trisolar world with three suns of equal mass. The three-body system is extremely unstable; even a minor disturbance to its equilibrium will cause a major change in the suns' movements in relation to each other. In the game, the instability of the trisolar system produces severe weather conditions that have annihilated successive civilizations. Any survivor culture must be extremely adaptive. Wang soon realizes that the virtual game represents a remote reality. A real trisolar system somewhere in the dark universe has already bred a super-civilization—that of the highly advanced and adaptive Trisolarans. Even worse, the Trisolarans have embarked on a mission to Earth to make it their new home. Wang learns that the alien species was able to locate Earth because a woman named Ye Wenjie, traumatized by the Cultural Revolution, deliberately revealed Earth's location to the Trisolarans. It did not take the Trisolaran's surveilling forces—mere protons, it turns out—long to reach Earth to obstruct the development of science. Quantum physics, for example, is but one of the many illusions Trisolarans have created for Earthlings. However, the human race is not yet in despair. The Three Body game has helped Earth identify a group of competent players from whom a master plan to resist the Trisolarians may emerge.

The Dark Forest, the second book in the trilogy, focuses on Earth's strategies for repelling the Trisolaran invasion. The breakthrough comes when humans discover that Trisolarans communicate through unfiltered thought—that is, they cannot conceal their intentions through metaphor, irony, or allegory. In comparison, humans are master liars. Thus, the Earthlings develop plans to dupe the Trisolarans. One of the plans is advanced by the strategist Luo Ji, who will broadcast the location of the Trisolar system to the entire universe if Trisolarans invade Earth. Once exposed, according to the dark forest theory, the Trisolarian home system will sooner or later face attack from

other unknown civilizations. But Luo Ji's plan must be kept a secret for it to succeed. He uses lies and fiction that the Trisolarans cannot understand to protect Earth—at least through the end of *The Dark Forest*.

When *Death's End*, the third in the trilogy, picks up, one of the Trisolarian's three suns has been demolished by an unknown civilization due to the humans' broadcast of their solar system's location. The Trisolarians have started to immigrate to Earth. But Earth is at risk of destruction as well, because, in revealing the coordinates of the Trisolarian system, the Earth has also exposed its own location.

The reception of *Santi* has been mixed in the Anglophone markets. The "flat" characters and "underdeveloped" plots (sfreviews par. 4) are considered flaws by some readers savvy in narrative-driven sf. Liu prioritizes the imagination of science rather than developing fully realized characters. Liu's protagonists appear "flat" because their motivations and internal struggles are not the foci of the narration. Characters are merely devices to drive the plot. These problems, however, do not prevent most critics from appreciating the suspense of a polyphonic world on the cusp of doom—especially when that world is rendered from a "Chinese" perspective. In fact, the first novel of the trilogy has been highly praised for carrying out the duty of bridging "the gap between Eastern and Western SF" (Heller par. 8). This novel is also known as a favorite of Barack Obama's, who says in an interview that it "was wildly imaginative, really interesting. It wasn't so much sort of character studies as it was just this sweeping [story about the fate of the universe]" (Obama, Kakutani, and Mills A15). The "flaws" are understood not as aesthetic strategies fit for critique but as cultural differences that can be quickly forgiven. Thus, the problems of Liu's sf have been resolved by its characterization as "the bestselling Chinese science fiction novel."[2]

The categorization of *Santi* as "Chinese sf" legitimizes an Orientalist position in approaching its aesthetic quiddities. For example, Nick Richardson and Hua Li both argue that Liu is trafficking in a stereotypical political conception of modern China. That China appears as the setting of an sf novel is itself an attraction. Many critics of sf have similarly recognized the Orientalist position in suggesting that Liu's novels reflect the changing political order of China and that they appeal to Western sensitivities about Chinese politics. This critique of attraction to Chinese poetry was made a few decades ago (Owen 31), and since about contemporary Chinese art (H. Wu 39) and film (Shih 38). It bears mentioning that this sort of critique is also a product of the institutional power embodied by Anglophone critics and editors: as Rey Chow notes, they hold power by writing in the dominant

academic language of English about a popular trilogy that happens to be Chinese in origin.

Institutional circumstantiality (academic, governmental, and commercial) structures the trilogy in each of its discrete versions, and the publishing history of the trilogy provides a précis of these transformations. After the Chinese magazine *Ke Huan Shi Jie* [*Science Fiction World*] published Liu serially in 2006, Chongqing Publishing House launched the book version of the serial in January 2008, making it the first novel of a *Santi* [*Three-Body*] trilogy. For the best-selling sf author in China (Song 398), the book form meant an even wider readership. However, when publishing the book version, the editors adjusted the narrative significantly. They moved the beginning sections featuring Ye Wenjie, the woman traumatized by the Cultural Revolution, to chapters seven through nine. The Chinese novel instead begins with the character Wang, whose perspective frames the entire novel.

The plot adjustment has stirred up controversies. In June 2017, while having dinner with several Chinese literary critics, I was told that because the serial version was published in the year of the thirtieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, and given the heightened vigilance on the part of the authorities, the Cultural Revolution episode, were it to appear at the very beginning of the novel, would likely have drawn scrutiny. *Ipso facto*, the publisher had to de-emphasize those Cultural Revolution scenes. I find this same anniversary speculation in the preface of a Chinese fan's pirated version of the novel. Another reason that might explain the publisher's incentive to self-censor is that the Cultural Revolution has rarely appeared as the setting of any sf before; this emendation may, additionally, be further seen as a byproduct of the transformation of the serialized text into a book, because books have more of an official status.

But these speculations contradict another reality about censorship in China: the Cultural Revolution is not a censored topic unless the work in question concerns the histories of high officials or their families (who, presumably, do not want their dirty laundry aired in public). As it happens, the theme of the Cultural Revolution appears frequently in Chinese novels, films, and artworks—Yu Hua's novel *To Live* (2005), Xie Jin's film *Hibiscus Town* (1986), and Cheng Conglin's painting *Snow on X Day X Month 1968* (1978) are just three examples[3]—regardless of whether these works were publicized on the tenth or twentieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution.[4] Liu's description of the Cultural Revolution is no more straightforward than any other genres', and the scene does not implicitly refer to any officials. So, why would Liu's sf be more likely to be censored than other genres? It remains

unclear whether self-censorship as a preservation strategy really mandated the plot adjustment by the Chinese publishers, and if so whether such a move was justified. Nonetheless, the apocryphal censorship story adds to the mystery of this book, and perhaps increases its appeal as an object of academic scrutiny.

The adjusted novel was an instant hit. Liu followed up the success of the first novel with two sequels—one in May 2008, one in November 2010—both published in novel form. The trilogy was then completed. At the time, sf was no longer plagued by "the characteristics of children's literature," such as "the pure and clear world" where good triumphs over evil (Wu and Mallan 45). More talented writers were producing increasingly complex novels that catered to adult readers. Liu has been credited with awakening Chinese readers' interest in domestic sf (Han 15). The wide accessibility afforded by the book form found Liu gaining visibility as a *writer*, rather than an *sf* writer. The genre of sf also reached readers beyond its typical fanbase. Chinese communities beyond mainland China also embraced Liu, and published their own Chinese editions of *The Three-Body Problem*. A Taipei publisher, Owl Publishing House, released their edition in the year 2011, reproducing the plot change instituted by Chongqing Publishing House in the 2008 book version. This narrative sequence has since dominated the Sinophone markets.

Tor Books, a major publisher of fantasy and sf based in New York, challenges this dominant version. They published Ken Liu's English translation of *The Three-Body Problem* in 2014. Not only did the English translation recover some paragraphs (on pp. 20–21 of the English edition) from the 2006 serial version—paragraphs not included in the 2008 book—it also foregrounded the Cultural Revolution plot that the Chinese novel publishers had originally downplayed. The first three chapters of the Tor edition—"The Madness Years," "Silent Spring," and "Red Coast I"—are set in China's turbulent political past; these are followed by episodes about the twenty-first-century scientist Wang and his adventures in the virtual space-time of the Three Body game.

The Three-Body Problem fed a hunger for global science fiction, with critics warmly responding to this Chinese contribution to the globalized genre of sf (even if they hardly realized that the translated version is different from the 2008 book). Liu's star rose further when the English translation of his novel won the 2015 Hugo Award. The bestowal of this prestigious award further piqued the interest of readers in Mainland China, as Liu's success echoed the Chinese literati's "quest for the Nobel literature prize" (Lovell 3). For China, the Nobel quest was a nationalistic project: the prize was sought to demonstrate the value of Chinese culture in the West. In this sf-tinted instance,

China's quest was to produce an sf author as heralded as Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, and Ursula K. Le Guin. When Liu received the Hugo in 2015, *China Science Daily* applauded him as a national hero (Shen par. 3). It can be said that Liu's trilogy was successful beyond its aesthetic qualities; it elicited a rewarding sense of national pride in the sf circle; it implied that Chinese sf could finally "shoulder more responsibility for solving the problems faced by human beings in a changing world" (Han 18).

Subsequently, the Chinese perception of domestic sf completely changed. In the 1980s, sf was still deemed an antirevolutionary promoter of capitalist elements (Han 16). In 1983, *People's Daily* accused sf of "spiritual pollution" (Y. Wu 13) because Marxism should be the only guiding science (Y. Wu 4). In the 1990s, despite the discouragement from the Chinese state, a new generation of sf writers became active, including Liu. At that time, sf was not a recognized genre. Similar to an earlier cultural moment in the US, sf was not considered a proper field of literary studies and thus not discussed as part of the literary canon until later. By the time *The Three-Body Problem* received global recognition, the genre of sf had been rehabilitated in China and was considered a national treasure by the Chinese party-state.

I summarize the publishing history of *The Three-Body Problem* in such a schematic manner to underscore how the institutional circumstances have made their mark on the different versions of the book. These adjustments are not trivial because they change the framing, the rhythm, and the plot of the novel. Because of the novel's textual history, one cannot isolate a unitary and coherent position of national pride or orientalist endorsement within it. What is promoted as the same sf package globally does not exist as one, but as many.

History as Dystopia

The trilogy is immense in scope and complex in political allegories. However, it first entices English-reading audiences not by dint of its plot, but rather its quality as a dystopian story from China. The trilogy's debut in the anglophone world was touted through history lessons like this one:

> Ye Wenjie is a young engineer working at Red Coast Base, a woman disillusioned with humanity by her father's persecution during the Cultural Revolution. She picks up a transmission from an alien pacifist who urges her to shut down the station. "Do not answer! Do not answer! Do not answer!" The aliens have heard Red Coast's signal but can't pinpoint the location of Earth. Any further communication will allow them to zero in, whereupon, the

pacifist alien tells her, his aggressive civilization will launch an annihilating attack. Ye Wenjie makes a decision. "Come here! I will help you conquer this world. Our civilization is no longer capable of solving its own problems. We need your force to intervene. (Dyson par. 4)

Like many other accounts found online in English-language media, this synopsis presents *The Three-Body Problem* as a linear story unfurling from a distinct origin point. The author of this particular synopsis, Stephen Benedict Dyson, an associate professor at the University of Connecticut and a critic of politics and popular culture, is not incorrect about the plot. He maximizes the novel's appeal by situating the story in a relatively well-known episode, namely, the Cultural Revolution, in what seems an effort to adapt his commentary to readers unfamiliar with Chinese history; the synopsis anchors the plot and attributes the origin of its conflicts to Ye, a brave but traumatized Chinese woman calling for aid from the outside. As the English edition of the novel opens, we see a battle between factions of red guards. The scene was graphic. A fifteen-year-old girl was shot. Her body "was so soft that the bullet hardly slowed down as it passed through it and whistled in the air behind her" (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem* 10). Readers unfamiliar with the Chinese history might not know what these factions are all about. Then, the novel shows the conflict between the militant revolutionaries and a physicist, Ye Taizhe. Accusing Ye of defending science, one Red Guard says, "Einstein is a reactive academic authority […] To develop a revolutionary science, we must overthrow the black banner of capitalism represented by the theory of relativity!" (Liu, *The Three-Body Problem* 14) Indeed, when the physicist refuses to repent his anti-revolutionary sin, the guards beat him to death. This scene was witnessed by Ye Wenjie, the daughter of Ye Taizhe. From this point on, the story unfolds from Ye's perspective. What follows is familiar: she was disillusioned and, when she received the first signal from the Trisolaran, invited them to Earth.

Dyson's summary presents Ye's personal past in the Cultural Revolution as a distant future—a time when disasters have already happened. And Dyson's synopsis is not singular. We can find a similar interpretation by Slavoj Žižek:

the most interesting feature of the novel is how the opposition between Earth and Trisolaris echoes the opposition between the traditional Confucian view of Heaven as the principle of cosmic order and Mao's praise for Heaven in disorder: is not the chaotic life on Trisolaris, where the very rhythm of seasons is perturbed, a naturalized version of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution? (Žižek 12)

In Žižek's interpretation, China's past stands in for the disorder on the distant alien planet, showing the sf elements of the Trisolaris as an episode that has already happened in Mao's China. Žižek thus treats the Cultural Revolution as a parallel to the disordered world of the Trisolaran world, in the sense that both symbolize chaos, and, in Žižek's Lacanian terms, "a great disorder in the Real" (Žižek 13). According to Žižek, Liu's sf is an attempt to conceptualize the Real, but can only be a semblance of it. Žižek seems to forget that there *is* in fact an unchanging order in the novel, the dark forest principle, which underlies the civilizational disorders on both worlds.

Dyson and Žižek coincide in their presentation of the plot because the English translation has moved the Cultural Revolution plot to the beginning of the book. This telling invites readings that are based on the stereotypical expectation of "the big bad China and good Chinese people" (Wasserstrom 13), centering the totalitarian mysticism of the Cultural Revolution. For anglophone readers of the novel—those who live in the "free enough" world of the West—it is in an "unfree" China that dystopia has already happened. I call this type of interpretive tendency *history as dystopia*—it is precisely what Dyson's and Žižek's interpretations mobilize to adjust the novel to Western sensibilities.

To Chinese critics, the Cultural Revolution narrative needs to be treated with caution. Mingwei Song, for example, writes that it is misleading to suggest "that Liu Cixin's space saga is underwritten by the politics of the Cultural Revolution" (97). According to Song, the appeal has to do with China as a source of warning and inspiration for understanding the amorality of the universe (97–98). Indeed, how disillusioned must this Chinese woman have become to invite aggressive aliens to reform or destroy humankind? Song acknowledges that the depiction of the Cultural Revolution is an attraction, especially to Western readers, but he understands that Liu's trilogy is much more than a Chinese history lesson.

The 2008 Chinese book version, in contrast, emphasizes the mystery and potential of science. From the first page, the story situates the reader in a mystery. The narrator, Wang Miao, is a nanomaterial researcher living in present-day China. The novel begins with Wang's view of a series of strange events: "Wang Miao thought the four people who came to find him made a rather odd combination: two cops and two men in military uniforms" (Liu, *Santi* 1, translation borrowed from the Tor edition). They came to recruit Wang's aid in investigating the suicides of famous scientists, which were related to the development of science on Earth, which were again linked to Trisolaran intervention. From page one, the novel reads here like a detective story, rather than an alternative history based on the Cultural Revolution.

The narrator conveys the information about the Trisolarans though the Three Body game. In each game play, Wang randomly joins a civilization from the past. In one game episode, Wang saw two European-looking men fighting a duel over who had first invented calculus. They were Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz. John von Neumann was trying to stop the fight when Wang approached the trio. The comedy in this scene unfolds when Wang asks Von Neumann: "Why did you have to come to the East to build a computer?" (Liu, *Santi* 153) and Von Neumann was puzzled: "A computer? A computing machine! Such a thing exists?" (Liu, *Santi* 153, translations borrowed from the Tor edition, on p. 208). Historical figures are in Liu's narratives just symbols that represent the limitations of human thinking put to the test in extreme conditions. When Wang is not playing the game, he investigates the history of Ye Wenjie. The history of the Cultural Revolution is then narrated as a flashback, but not as the main frame of the novel.

In contrast, the Tor edition follows a chronologically linear narrative. It starts with a cause in Mao's China that escalates into conflict in the present. The English version even adds a section break present in neither the Chinese serial fiction nor the book version. The Cultural Revolution chapters are grouped into "Part I: Silent Spring," indicating that Ye's traumatic past is the origin for the future conflicts. The linear structure serves to foreground a single dramatic moment, thereby reducing a complex, unstable world to a unitary origin.

The English edition's titles also favor linearity rather than formal complexity. Tor decided that the first novel should be called *The Three-Body Problem*, while dubbing the entire trilogy *Remembrance of Earth's Past*—another alternative history framing. The second and the third novels are called *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End* in English, respectively. The Chinese trilogy as a whole, however, is called *Santi*, with the individual novels entitled *Three-Body: Remembrance of Earth's Past*, *Three-Body: Dark Forest*, and *Three-Body: Dead End* (Han 18). The repeated phrase "Three Body" highlights the formal problem of an unstable system that lacks sustained structure. Three Body also, in a self-reflexive fashion, echoes the notion of trilogy. In contrast, the Tor edition's title categorizes the story as an "alternate history" narrative, that is, a type of narrative that substitutes fictional stories for the history of record.

Suggestively, another possible reason for foregrounding Ye's narrative is to assimilate a tried-and-true formula for sf. Carl Sagan's *Contact* (1985; film Zemeckis 1997), one of the most significant sf works on alien communication, anticipates many of the plot points in the serial and English version of the

Santi trilogy. *Contact* is initially set in the 1960s, against the backdrop of the arms race and increased funding for outer-space exploration. The story begins with an American girl, Ellie, who fights her way through the male-dominated field of radio astronomy and becomes the director of an observatory. Her stepfather is a blend of indifferent and patronizing, and her university professor discourages her from pursuing her interest in extraterrestrial intelligence—but the adverse situation does not stop Ellie from her idiosyncratic search for communicative patterns in the noisy radio signals received from the wider universe. And Ellie's persistence yields fruit: her project reveals an intelligence source that keeps broadcasting its message to Earth.

The beginning of the English version of *The Three-Body Problem* echoes Sagan's conceit. Just like Ellie, Ye Wenjie is discouraged—in her case by a repressive regime—but she does not let the political situation distract her from her devotion to astrophysics. Ye too, like Ellie, becomes a staff researcher at an observatory, and, after years of persistence, receives a signal from an alien civilization.

I am not trying to prove that Liu was under the influence of Sagan's *Contact* when writing *The Three-Body Problem*. But such striking similarity would not have entirely eluded the attention of Liu's translator, editors, and critics, and might have influenced aesthetic decisions, consciously or not, while the novel was being prepared for anglophone markets. The 2008 Chinese novel text of *The Three-Body Problem* is much less similar to *Contact* in terms of narrative structure, since it downplays the Cultural Revolution scenes and its sequence of events is much less linear.

One noticeable simplification about the alien encounter is that the first contact with Ye does not require any decryption algorithm. It might seem unrealistic that Earthlings and Trisolarans could simply and immediately communicate as soon as they encounter each other. But this lack of credibility is compensated for by the realism of the dystopic Cultural Revolution scenes: dedicated Red Guards defend Mao's principles and revolt against the bourgeois-corrupted university; the communist spirit crushes all capitalist evils, like bourgeois science and revolutionary revisions; and scientists either repent or lose all their belongings—or even, sometimes, their lives. Indeed, China's cultural past unfolds not only as dystopian fiction in the *Three-Body Problem* but also with the fictive realism of China-*as*-dystopia, much the way anti-totalitarian novels by George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, and Margaret Atwood operate. The paradoxical realism of China as dystopia in the English edition of *The Three-Body Problem* substitutes for the scientific realism of *Contact*.

Encyclopedic Narrative

Much more than just a thematic focal point, the unstable three-body system underlies the structure of events in *Santi*. In fact, at the same time that the English version invites the "history as dystopia" and "China as dystopia" readings, Liu's narrative resists that reading by posing an epistemological challenge. Akin to the three-body system, in which any disturbance to the system's equilibrium will cause a major change in the movements of each body in relation to each other, Liu's narrative is an intricate dance. This dance is not easy to discern, but it is not impossible. In fact, Liu's narrative encourages a type of reading that counters the tendency to read for synthetic concepts about China, history, or dystopia on the basis of a few characteristics of the trilogy. The narrative structure frustrates interpreters' attempts to use the novels to contextualize grand, fictive concepts about China.

In exploring Liu's inheritance from earlier Western science fiction writers and his narrative innovations, I find two canonical sf writers, Arthur C. Clarke and Ursula K. Le Guin, pivotal for understanding the complexity of Liu's multi-layered style. The affinities between Liu and Clarke are well documented and pertinent to any investigation of Liu's literary inspiration; the linkage between Liu's approach to character development and Le Guin's method of building personable characters is less explicit but equally important in providing a framework to Liu's narrative strategies. In examining Clarke and Le Guin, I also discover traces of Liu's careful deviations from both of them. In these deviations, I argue, lies Liu's novelty.

In his essay "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature," translated and published in the journal *Science Fiction Studies*, Liu writes that he has absorbed from Clarke the technique of "macro-detail." Referring to works by Clarke, Liu describes "macro-detail" as a mode to construct a world of rationality and mysticism (*à la* Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [Kubrick 1968]). Despite the fact that Clarke is an important influence on Liu, a significant difference distinguishes the two: without diverting into an extended analysis of Clarke, it is fair to say that Clarke's approach to representation is more "techno-prophetic" (Poole 255) than Liu's, an orientation characteristic of sf writing moved by the peril of military technologies in the post-atomic era. The godly figure of the monolith that transcends human rationality in Stanley Kubrick and Clarke's modern epic film and subsequent novelization of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, is a symbol of the "techno-prophet" representation of a unified, coherent, and immanent world. But Liu's trilogy epitomizes rationalism without any

transcendental being like the conclusive, consistent symbol of the monolith. Characters and symbols in *Santi* do not confirm the coherence of the whole; rather each in its own way contributes to the discordance and the inconclusiveness of the *Santi* world.

Characters in Liu's trilogy also perform specific functions: often to supply literary and historical allusions. This may appear a well-worn narrative technique at first sight. Conventionally, individual characters serve the purpose of guiding readers through the details of bigger worlds (as in *Oliver Twist* [1839] and *Madame Bovary* [1856]). Le Guin makes a strong case for how the presence of "small" characters and their personal histories can open space for big worlds. In her article "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," she describes Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Brown" method and extrapolates it to sf writing to show that sf is not just about the imagination of science and external worlds. The "Mrs. Brown" method uses characters with nothing special and no particular qualities, that is, a "Mrs. Brown." Any character can be a Mrs. Brown, whom one finds on trains, at street corners, or in tea houses, a figure of plainness and simplicity, so typical of her environment that one can discern through her interactions with the world thick social layers. Le Guin then inquires: Can the ordinary Mrs. Brown also exist in the outlandish settings of sf, fantasy, and fairy tale? By asking this question, Le Guin implies that sf is also about the personal realms of wishful thinking, naïve behaviors, and daydreams—the stuff of everyday ordinary life.

Liu's trilogy is full of Mrs. Brown types, but his Mrs. Browns are different from the sort Le Guin identifies. Ye, for one, is a Mrs. Brown; so is Luo Ji from *The Dark Forest* and Yun Tianming from *Death's End,* whose private inner lives reveal something large. Ye's brief introspective narratives are nodal points that connect the different subject domains of science, morality, and history; Ye's past may appear in hasty, under-elaborated fragments, but these historical allusions correspond to the unfolding of a global-scale religious worship of the Trisolaran civilization, taking the connection between Ye's devotion to science and religious belief to a more abstract level. In *Death's End*, the importance of personal history in anchoring the fate of humankind is put forward to the reader even more bluntly. The entire novel is driven by the interpretation of an allegory based on the communication between Yun Tianming, the only human who understands the future of Earth, and his beloved, a woman who is chosen to decipher his allegorical message. Their personal histories serve no purpose other than providing the necessary nodal points to make the spheres of love, storytelling, and science connect. Liu's Mrs. Browns are not fully developed personalities and are, admittedly, less interesting than characters in Le Guin's

works. Nonetheless, Liu's Mrs. Browns function as referential hubs that allow allegorical, metaphorical symbols to form a non-linear network.

Operating in the interstices between Clarke and Le Guin, Liu pulls readers in opposite directions; he invites us to read for the complexity of the grand world and to pause for the simplicity of each metaphor and allegory. Arthur C. Clarke's modern epic and Le Guin's personable characters shed light on these polarities of Liu's aesthetic, even though Liu's narrative deviates from both. Indeed, Liu's style resists any complete, general reading that readers of Western canonical sf find familiar. The underlying structure of Liu's work reflects a more critical attempt to address a problem all writers must face: How can any limited literary form capture the proliferating meanings in the world of science?

This problem has a long-standing expression in the sf world: encyclopedism. H. G. Wells, in his 1937 essay "World Brain," envisions an encyclopedic project, i.e., a synthetic, permanent collection of universally accessible references. This project would educate the entire population and construct a harmonious, peaceful global system. H. P. Lovecraft, meanwhile, constructs his world of monsters and alien creatures in the manner of encyclopedia entries. Referring to Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness," political scientist Chia Yi Lee recounts the publication history of Lovecraft's 50,000-word book and the "scientific encyclopaedism therein" (Lee 2). Science fiction author Andrew Crumey has also produced what literary critic David Goldie calls "intricate, nested narratives, non-linearity, ludic encyclopedism" influenced by modernist writers such as "Borges, Calvino, and Miloard Pavic" (Goldie 54).

Beyond science fiction, encyclopedism has an extended tradition in literary modernism (James Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922], Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* [1943]) and postmodernism (Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973], David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* [1996]). Edward Mendelson coins the term "encyclopedic narrative" to describe a type of fiction that *ex ante* acquires a monumental status (1268). Paul Saint-Amour suggests that encyclopedism was most prominent during the historically specific period of the 1920s and 1930s. His analysis features a post-traumatic anxiety that marks the interwar years, a fear that necessitates a literary mode devoted to preserving and remembering lost societies. Expanding Saint-Amour's concept, Stefano Ercolino argues that encyclopedism is also self-reflective and anti-total, since it often manages to show the impossibility of capturing the whole. In Ercolino's terminology, "the encyclopedic mode" refers to a particular cognitive attitude toward the difficult task of representing the world—and the knowledge and perspectives of it—in its completeness (39). Encyclopedism is not just a symptom of interwar anxiety

but also the epitome of modern cognition in general. Accordingly, encyclopedic narratives take up the challenge of presenting worlds in their entirety, and ironically, prove the impossibility of ever encapsulating the world.

In this sense, Liu's narrative is encyclopedic because it creates a parodic impression of totality, not totality itself; Liu presents incomplete but interconnected pictures of unlimited worlds. Many of Liu's stories about a domain or artifact are not elaborative. His narratives produce a synthesis of different subject domains through literary constructions of heterogeneous scenarios; showcasing inexhaustible possibilities, he presents totality without totalizing narratives. Liu's work is not limited by the difficulty of representing totality.

For example, in *The Dark Forest,* Liu refers to the fictive technology of "ball lightning" during a decisive battle scene. But only those who are familiar with the technology's book-long elaboration in another of Liu's novels entitled *Ball Lightning* (whose English translation appeared in August 2018) will understand what Liu is hinting at by relating this technology to a military strategist. In *Ball Lightning*, the character who devotes her life to this military technology is a mixture of the devoted but disillusioned Ye and the positivistic, clear-headed cop Da Shi in *The Three-Body Problem*. But *Ball Lightning* is not a prequel to the trilogy, since there is no deliberate attempt to ensure continuity from the novel to the trilogy. Instead, this example shows that Liu's encyclopedic narratives are packed with references, whose elaborations can only be found intertextually.

Liu's encyclopedic narratives function by creating shortcuts like the ball lightning reference. Shortcuts replace the connection between the part and the whole, counter-discourse and totality, single domains and the entirety of knowledge. Literary and historical references generate an infinite set of relationships between subject domains. However, in the English translation of *The Dark Forest,* the short episode about "Ball Lightning" was completely cut out—perhaps because the plot around this technology reads as underdeveloped. The intertextuality of Liu's novel is thus compromised, likely for the purpose of covering up a presumed flaw about the underdeveloped plot.

Liu's encyclopedic narratives highlight the tension between unlimited data and finite narrative. *Santi* sketches out a world through polyphonic descriptions of actual and possible situations, and how these situations might be related; however much readers are absorbed by the stories themselves, *Santi* also shows readers the relational principles of civilization. In the place of impossible totality, Liu's networks of allusions create an understanding of the whole through abstractly imagining the basic, relational principles that make up a civilization.

Conclusion

The Tor edition includes no preface to inform readers of the different publications of *The Three-Body Problem* and their contexts. As a result, most Anglophone readers are oblivious to the aesthetic implications of changing plot sequences, the concerns about the Cultural Revolution narrative, and the enigmatic self-censoring mechanism that shapes the Chinese editions. What the Tor edition affords is an ambiguous link between the novel and its political context, entailing the reading of Liu's works as a condescending, dystopic fantasy of China's cultural past—a Chinese sf.

   This fantasy is also readily present in various receptions of Liu's trilogy: in the discourses concerning the recognition of Liu as a Chinese sf writer, and in how the publishing world unproblematically seeks ethnic versions of sf through his trilogy. Given certain isolated features of his trilogy, one would be inclined to draw conclusions like the following: that Liu writes social criticism under the guise of sf, that he affords nationalist readings, or that he adjusts to the sensibility of English reading markets. Any such generalization will immediately reveal itself as too restrictive for a nuanced understanding of *Santi*. This paper analyzes why each of these interpretations cannot capture the structural complexity of the novel; what Liu's encyclopedic narrative ultimately demands is a type of reading that does not rest on any single characteristic or political position.

Notes

1 The title of the trilogy is different in each version. The political and aesthetic implications of each trilogy will be elaborated further in this paper. I use *Santi* as a shorthand for the trilogy as a whole throughout the paper for the technical purpose of unifying terminology.

2 The tagline "The bestselling Chinese science fiction novel, available in English for the first time" can be found on the cover of the Tor edition translated by Ken Liu.

3 The Eleventh San Zhong Quan Hui (The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Central Committee), held in 1978, officially accepted the Cultural Revolution as the party's mistake. In the decades afterwards, novels and films about the trauma of the Cultural Revolution sprouted from all regions of China in a trend known as "scar literature." Many academic books on post-Mao China have also commented on cultural critique of the Cultural Revolution.

4 One might argue that the theme of the Cultural Revolution has already become a cliché, as embodied by the artistic trend vividly termed "scar literature" and "scar art," and thus the publishers resituated the theme for aesthetic reasons.

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